

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

3 April 1983

ARTICLE APPEARED

ON PAGE 3, Sec. 1

# Argentina cuts ties to Nicaragua rebels

By John Maclean  
and George de Lama

Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON—Argentina has ended its program of training and equipping anti-Sandinista forces in Central America, making it necessary for the United States to play a more direct role in helping the fighters, U.S. sources have said.

Argentina withdrew its cooperation mainly because it does not want to jeopardize continued diplomatic support from Nicaragua on the Falkland Islands dispute, the sources said. The leftist Sandinista government and communist Cuba have been two of Argentina's strongest backers on this issue.

"Argentina's concerns these days are internal," one U.S. official here said.

Argentina had sent military advisers to Honduras, where they helped train anti-Sandinista Nicaraguans, and had acted as a middle-man for the United States, funneling American cash from the CIA to these groups. According to U.S. sources here and in Central America, the Argentine presence was never large, but it provided a "cutout" for the United States, making it possible for the Reagan administration to provide funds indirectly to the anti-Sandinista fighters.

SINCE THE Falkland Islands war last spring, the Argentines have had no more than 25 such military advisers in Honduras, where some of the anti-Sandinista groups have trained in camps along the Nicaraguan border, U.S. sources said.

As recently as last December, 18 Argentine military advisers were in Honduras; now no more than one Argentine military adviser is left, sources said. Many of the posts they filled have been taken up by Honduran military officers.

Despite the limited scope of the Argentine operation, its withdrawal leaves the Reagan administration with a new problem with Congress. Several congressmen have become alarmed by Nicaraguan reports of fighting and question whether the Reagan administration has seriously overstepped congressional restraints on covert activity in Central America.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D., N.Y.) predicted further congressional action to limit covert U.S. activity once Congress returns from its Easter recess. Moynihan, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said many legislators "question whether the CIA is complying with the law."

LAST DECEMBER, the House unanimously passed an amendment to the Defense Department appropriations bill prohibiting the use of U.S. funds for "military equipment, military training or advice, or other support for military activities" designed to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.

Moynihan and others have expressed concern about the Reagan administration's overall policy in the region. Inquiries here and in Central America indicate that the United States has an ambiguous policy bordering on support for the overthrow of the Sandinista regime.

"Some days I am convinced the administration is trying to topple the Sandinistas," one U.S. diplomat in Central America said. "Then there are other days when it looks like they are not trying to overthrow the Sandinistas at all, just harass them."

Another U.S. official described U.S. policy toward Nicaragua as, "Let 100 flowers bloom," meaning the United States is encouraging any sort of opposition.

THE OPPOSITION to the Sandinista government has been growing inside Nicaragua and now includes former Sandinistas and business and political leaders, including the last two Sandinista ambassadors to Washington. Also opposed to the Sandinista regime are Miskito Indians who underwent forced relocation and devout Roman Catholics who resent the Sandinistas' treatment of their church hierarchy and especially of Pope John Paul II on his recent visit.

Former supporters of the late President Anastasio Somoza, who was deposed by the Sandinistas, are a minority in the opposition, even among fighters in guerrilla camps. Former national guardsmen amount to no more than 2 or 3 percent of the anti-Sandinista forces, according to some estimates. Other estimates put the number at 20 percent; even their critics outside Nicaragua do not contend that they are a majority.

One concern of American policymakers is that indiscriminate support for the contras, as the insurgents are known, will give the Sandinista government the opportunity to label all opposition as American-inspired and connected with former Somoza supporters.

These policymakers, who appear to have been overruled, argue that a big lesson of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba is being ignored. In the Bay of Pigs, the United States supported a group that included all opposition elements willing to join, including many former supporters of dictator Fulgencio Batista, who was overthrown by Fidel Castro.

"The bad drives out the good in situations like that," one U.S. policymaker said.

IN NICARAGUA, the moderate opponents of the Sandinista regime have been highly critical of U.S. policy, contending that it only gives the Sandinistas an excuse to postpone elections, ban political activity and increase repression.

Publicly, the United States says it wants a pluralistic, democratic regime in Nicaragua, which means a complete change from the present government. The United States also says in public that it does not support a return to the days of Somoza.

"We do not support any return to a Somocista government in Nicaragua," said Alan Romberg, a State Department spokesman. "The opposition in Nicaragua is diverse, nationalist and independent. Over preceding months there has been rising opposition to the government of Nicaragua, including within Nicaragua itself."

"Nicaraguan opposition ranges from disillusioned popular sectors to ethnic groups such as the Miskito Indians, former national guardsmen, former Sandinistas themselves such as Eden Pastora [the famous Commander Zero] as well as other anti-Somocista groups."

WHEN THE REAGAN administration first put forward a plan for aiding anti-Sandinista forces, it justified the effort on grounds that it was helping stop the Nicaraguan government from sending arms into El Salvador.